

*Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009*

**Remarks Celebrating the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate**

*October 14, 2009*

Thank you so much. Thank you, Patrick, for that generous introduction and for ensuring that the Kennedy family spirit of public service lives on as strong as ever.

Some of the Cabinet Secretaries who are doing good work day in and day out on behalf of the American people have joined us tonight, so I want to make mention of them: our outstanding Attorney General, Eric Holder; our Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis, who's doing wonderful work; Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius; and Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano.

It's also a testament to Ted Kennedy that so many of his congressional colleagues and friends have come together for this cause. And I want to thank Ted's longtime friend and adviser, and our newest member of the United States Senate, Paul Kirk, for his deep commitment to public service. Paul, I hope you remember to add your name to the drawer of the desk to which two Kennedys from Massachusetts carved theirs before you.

And to Vicki and all the members of the Kennedy family—to Ted and Kara and, obviously, Patrick—there are few who are not inspired by the grace and love that all of you have shown throughout a difficult time.

Our friend Ted left us less than 2 months ago. In the days that followed, we gathered in Boston to celebrate his life with a joyous Irish wake, of sorts, at the John F. Kennedy Library and with heavy hearts on Mission Hill. We watched as mourners lined the streets of Massachusetts and Washington in the rain to say a final thank you and as decades' worth of his colleagues and staff lined the steps of the Capitol to say a final goodbye. And we smiled as the Caucus Room in the Russell Building, a room where so much American history was made, was renamed for the three Kennedy brothers who served there.

And over those days, there was some small measure of comfort in the fact that millions of Americans were reminded of Ted Kennedy's legacy and a new generation came to know of it: his legacy as a man who loved his family and loved his country; his legacy as a Senator who crafted hundreds of pieces of legislation and helped pass thousands more, all with an incalculable impact on the lives of ordinary Americans; his legacy as a mentor who not only taught so many young Senators, including myself, but inspired so many young people and young staffers, some who entered public service because of Teddy, others who, because of him, just plain refused to leave. [*Laughter*]

Tonight, thanks to the efforts of each and every one of you, we're here to consider another legacy—one not yet written—of a man who loved the history and vibrancy of a uniquely American institution and was absolutely determined to keep it alive in our time. There is no greater tribute we could offer him than to make the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate a reality.

When Teddy first arrived in the United States Senate, he immersed himself in the issues of the day and the concerns of folks back home. But he also threw himself into the history of the Chamber. He studied its philosophical underpinnings; he studied its giants and their careers, the times that influenced its Members, and how its Members influenced the times. He

became fluent in procedure and protocol, no matter how obscure, until he could master the Senate as easily as he mastered the oceans.

No one made the Senate come alive like he did. He loved its history and its place in our American story. Rarely was he more animated than when he'd lead you through the living museums that were his office and his hideaway office in the Capitol. They held memories that stood still, even as he refused to. And he could—and he would—tell you everything there was to know about each artifact, each object that you were seeing.

Any of us who've had the privilege to serve in that institution know that it's impossible not to share Teddy's feeling for the history that swirls around us. It's a place where you instinctively pull yourself a little straighter and commit yourself to acting a little nobler.

I still remember the first time I pulled open the drawer of my desk and saw the names like Taft and Baker, Simon and Wellstone and Robert F. Kennedy. I thought of the great battles they'd waged and how they still echoed through the Senate Chambers. And one can't enter the Chamber without thinking of the momentous debates that have occurred within its walls, questions of war and peace, of the tangled bargain between North and South, Federal and State, of the origins of slavery and prejudice, of the unfinished battles for civil rights and equality and opportunity.

It was where Americans of great eloquence deliberated and discussed the great issues of the age, where Webster and Clay and Calhoun fought and forged compromise, where LBJ stalked the aisles, imposing his will and collecting votes, and where Ted Kennedy raged at injustice like a force of nature, even after a staffer would hand him a note saying, "Sir, you're shouting." [Laughter]

At its worst, it could be a place where progress was stymied. There was a time, of course, when there were no desks for women or African Americans or Latino Americans or Asian Americans. There was a time when a Senator might have referred to another as a—I like this—"noisome, squat, and nameless animal"—[laughter]—just to name one instance of the occasional lack of decorum. And we should all view it as a positive sign that there hasn't been a caning on the Senate floor in more than 150 years. [Laughter] That's good.

But at its best, it was what Ted Kennedy loved, a place of community and camaraderie, where Senators inspired their colleagues to seek out those better angels and work collectively to perfect our Union, bit by bit. And in my time in the Senate, I never met a colleague, not even one with whom I most deeply disagreed, who didn't have a deep sincerity in his or her beliefs, an abiding love for this country, and a genuine desire to leave it stronger and better.

Still, I know that many of us, from both parties, shared Ted's sentiment that something vital about the Senate has been lost. Where it once was a more personal and more collegial place, it's become more polarized and more confrontational. And gone, sometimes, is that deeper understanding of one another, that ideas—that there are great battles to be won and great battles to be waged, but not against the person on the other side of the aisle, rather to be waged on behalf of the country.

What Ted wanted to save, above anything else, is that sense of community and collegiality and mutual responsibility to our constituents, to the institution, and to one another. "As Senators," he wrote, "we need to be vigilant that we don't lose track of the whole essence of what the Senate is; of what our involvement in it signifies; of our relationship with people; and of what all of that should lead to, which is the unfettered and vital exchange of ideas."

That's why whenever heartbreak struck a colleague, he was always the first to call. That's why whenever a stalemate needed to be broken, he was the first to visit another Senator's office. That's why whenever debate got fierce, he never got personal, because that was the fastest way to ensure nothing got done. Once after he and Strom Thurmond went at each other for a few rounds—as you'd imagine Ted and Strom might do—Ted put his arm around him and said, "C'mon, Strom. Let's go upstairs, and I'll give you a few judges." [*Laughter*]

The thing is, even though he never technically ran the Senate, it often felt like Teddy did. It was his arena. That's why if you came to the Senate hoping to be a great Senator someday, he was who you went to see first. I know that's who I went to see first. Because rather than lord over it, Teddy sought to mentor others to better navigate it. Rather than to go it alone, he sought cooperation. He never hesitated to cede credit. And rather than abandon course when political winds got rough, he always followed his north star: the cause of a society that is more fair, more decent, and more just. And through all of it, his seriousness of purpose was rivaled only by his humility, his warmth, his good cheer, his sense of humor.

That is who Ted Kennedy was. That's what he did, and that's why he's so missed. And that's why the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate is such a vital and important idea.

It'll be a living institute where students and teachers and the public can come together and learn about the role and importance of the Senate he loved so much. It'll be a place where the most significant moments of progress and peril from our history come alive in recreations and seminars and lectures. It'll be a place for new Senators and their staff to get a little training, which we can all use, right, Paul? [*Laughter*] And all of it will embody Ted Kennedy's undeniable passion for improving our civic responsibility, increasing our public participation, enhancing our national life.

And most importantly, this institute will stoke a new passion for the Senate and inspire, we hope, a new generation to pursue the Kennedy legacy of service. For it is now, especially now, that we need to get people interested in our public problems and reignite their faith in our public institutions, bring Americans together to forge consensus and understand not just the United States Senate's role in our Government, but their role in it as well.

Today, the Senate is engaged in another important battle on one of the great causes of our time, the cause of Ted Kennedy's life, the battle to make health care not a privilege for some, but a right for all. He has been so sorely missed in this debate, especially now that we're closer than we've ever been to passing real health reform. But even though we took a critical step forward this week, we've got more work to do. And I hope and believe that we will continue to engage each other with the spirit of civility and seriousness that has brought us this far, a spirit that I think Teddy would have liked to see.

More than a half a century ago, a Senate committee was set up to choose the five greatest Senators of all time. No, it wasn't an exercise in the Senate's own vanity; it was because there were five empty spaces designated for portraits in the Senate Reception Room.

"There are no standard tests to apply to a Senator," the chairman of that committee wrote. "No Dun & Bradstreet rating, no scouting reports. His talents may vary with his time; his contribution may be limited by his politics. To judge his own true greatness, particularly in comparison with his fellow senators long after they are dead, is nearly an impossible task."

When John F. Kennedy wrote those words, I doubt that he imagined his 25-year-old brother would one day stand as indisputably one of the finest Senators of this or any age. But

here's the thing: Teddy didn't earn that distinction just because he served in the United States Senate for nearly 1 out of every 5 days of its existence. He earned it because each of those days was full and passionate and productive and advanced the life of this Nation in a way that few Americans ever have. And he did it all by bridging the partisan divide again and again in an era when—that someday may be recalled as one where bipartisanship was too rare an achievement.

There will never be another like Ted Kennedy. But there will be other great Senators who follow in his footsteps. That's not an insult to his legacy; it is, rather, the legacy he sought to leave, both with this institute and with his example.

"Being a Senator changes a person," he wrote in his memoirs. "Something fundamental and profound happens to you when you arrive there, and it stays with you all the time that you are privileged to serve. I have seen the changes in people who have come into the Senate. It may take a year, or 2 years, or 3 years, but it always happens; it fills you with a heightened sense of purpose."

In all our debates, through all our tests, over all the years that are left to come, may we all be blessed with a sense of purpose like Edward M. Kennedy's. Thank you, Vicki. Thanks to all of you. Thanks for making this such a success. God bless you; God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:21 p.m. at the Ritz Carlton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Patrick J. Kennedy II and Edward M. Kennedy, Jr., sons, Kara Kennedy Allen, daughter, and Victoria R. Kennedy, wife, of former Senator Kennedy. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 15.

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